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Pottery in Sirigu Society: The Socio-Cultural Relevance and the Need for Sustenance

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Abstract:

The study examines the Socio-cultural roles of pottery in Sirigu, an artistic community in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The research made use of qualitative methods of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and observations to collate the views of potters, some executives of Sirigu Women Organization of Pottery and Art, family heads, as well as some traditional medicine men in the Sirigu Community. The findings of the study revealed that pottery production in Sirigu is predominantly a female oriented vocation. The research further showed that pottery usage in the community was not only limited to the domestic setting, where they were used in fetching and storing water, as well as the preparation of various meals and beverages. They were also extensively employed in many socio-cultural activities deemed very crucial for promoting well being and camaraderie, as well as venerating ancestors and other spirit beings. Pottery usage in Sirigu indeed reflects the cosmological leanings of the people of the community. It was also discovered that pottery making in Sirigu is gradually declining due to the disinterest of the youth in pottery production as well as the strong liking for metal, plastic and fiberglass vessels by most households in the community.

Keywords: Sirigu Pottery, Upper East Region, African Pots

1. Introduction

Sirigu is a scenic village which shares border with Burkina Faso to the West, and four other sister communities namely; Mirigu, Natungia, Zoko and Yua. It is reputed for its exquisite pottery, captivating mural art, striking earth-built architecture, and unique basket wares. The community has a rural outlook and could be located in the Kassena Nankana West District with its administrative capital at Paga. Sirigu is about 30 kilometers from the Upper East Regional capital of Ghana, Bolgatanga. The people of Sirigu are largely subsistence farmers who cultivate millet, sorghum and groundnut. They also raise cattle, goats, chicken and guinea fowls. Pottery production in Sirigu is carried out in large scale during the dry season after harvest. This spans February to mid May. Pottery making in Sirigu is a highly valued artistic profession which provides ecologically friendly and cheap wares for everyday use. The term “pottery” generally covers objects made of clay and hardened through heat, which chemically transforms the clay material from a plastic state to a more durable and indestructible material (Enclopedia Britannica, 2013).

2. Research Problem

Pottery has been produced and used in many communities in Ghana. In the northern sector of the country, the alluring and dainty wares produced by the potters in Sirigu can be attested to by many. These pottery objects are collected by both local and international connoisseurs for varied reasons. However, the socio-cultural relevance of the pottery wares in the Sirigu community cannot be fully appreciated due to the scanty information covering this art form. Considering the fact that in many African communities pottery is “seen as dramatically endangered” (Barley, 1994), an attempt to understand the socio-cultural roles played by these Pottery wares in the Sirigu traditional setting by the researcher can only be seen as timely. The focus of this study is therefore to uncover the socio-cultural importance of the pottery objects in the Sirigu society, as well as underpin the factors that are militating against the continuity and sustenance of the pottery tradition.

3. Methods

The study made use of a combination of descriptive and explanatory designs which permits in-depth description, explanatory and analysis of the variables being studied. The initial study for this paper was carried out in 2008. A follow up study was conducted in 2013 to substantiate the earlier study, using qualitative methods of focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and observations to collate the views of potters and traditional medicine men in the Sirigu Community. Specifically, 56 potters, 5 traditional medicine Men, 20 family heads and 3 workers of the Sirigu Women Organization of Pottery and Arts (SWOPA), were sampled using snowball

and purposive sampling methods for the study. The purposive sampling technique was used because it presents the opportunity for quickly and cost-effectively selecting the targeted sample with specialist knowledge on the issue under study (Oliver, 2006). The snowball method was employed because most of the potential respondents are concealed. This method therefore made it possible for the researcher to contact respondents with an 'escalating set of potential contacts' (Atkinson & Flint, 2004).

4. Literature Review

The conspicuous roles played by pottery in the lives of most Africans and many other civilizations around the world cannot be overstressed. Pottery helps to posit the evolutionary history of many cultures around the globe through the archaeological study of pottery shards left over by evolving societies, which echo their changing developmental stages (Sieber, 1992).

Archaeological findings of pottery shards from the Sudan indicate that pottery was made and used about 1000 years ago in Africa. Pottery shards dating between 9000 – 8000 years were located at various parts of Africa, indicating the development of well-formed and highly decorated pottery traditions in Africa (Speight and Toku, 1999). The authors are of the opinion that the assortment of textural decorations and the thinness of the walls of the pottery shards discovered suggest an even earlier development of ceramic technology on the African continent.

The sophistry of the Nok terracotta sculpture pieces which were found in the Nok village of the present day Nigeria, indicates an advanced usage of clay in fashioning figurative objects in Africa as early as 500 B.C. to 200 A.D. This date concurs with Ancient Greek civilization (Clarke, C. 2006).

Barley (1994), writes that pottery provides architectural accents such as roof finials, skylights, well and latrine linings, as well as roof tiles in most African cultures. The author further explains that pottery was made into lamps, beads, lip-plugs, coffins, funeral monuments and sieves, milk churns, mortars, grindstones, gambling chips, dolls, beehives, fumigators and even rat-traps by African potters. Expanding further on the cultural roles of pottery in Africa, Berns (1989) posits that in the Gongola Valley of Northeastern Nigeria a group of potters produced anthropomorphic pottery wares which were employed in domestic, ritual, and sacred activities. Speight and Toku (1999) add that the Ashanti people of Ghana usually position a variety of pots known as *abusua kuruwa*, together with a cooking pot, implements, and hearthstones, alongside the grave of the recently interred. The *abusua kuruwa* pot usually contained the hair of all blood relatives of the dead person, cut-off from their heads. The source however could not explain the exact symbolism of the above ritual.

In many cultures in Africa, pots represent wealth and fertility; they are usually presented to cherished and valued guests as tokens of respect and love (Langenkamp, 1999).

Touching on the use of pots among the Gurensi people of Northern Ghana, Smith (1989) reveals that when a person dies in the community, a special funeral pot containing locally brewed *pito* beer, was placed at the entrance of the deceased's room during the funeral period, as a symbol of the family's hospitality. Visitors to the funeral partook of the beer, and it was believed the deceased also drank some of it. Smith advances further that a woman's eating bowl, which was believed to symbolize her personality, was shattered together with any other pot in her room, to mark the summation of the funeral rites. The potshards were preserved, and acted as a link between the deceased woman, her family, and the earth. Potshards, the author explains were also used in constructing shrines in most Gurensi communities. Among the *Ga* people of Ghana, Bredwa-Mensah (1996) postulates that pottery wares played crucial roles in the celebration of the *Homowo* festival of the *Ga* People. The author asserts that special vessels known as *ntaaso* are used during the preparation of *kpoikpoi*, which is the ceremonial food used by the *Ga* people during the annual *Homowo* festival. Bredwa-Mensah explains further that pottery played important roles in various rituals carried out to fortify, cleanse, and heal in the *Ga* society. The author adds that most *Ga* people believe palm wine and water tastes better and remains fresh when stored in earthenware vessels.

In most pottery producing communities in South Africa, pottery wares were employed in the preparation and serving of meals and beverages. They were equally used to fetch and store water, dispense medicines; burn incense as well as slivers of meat in rituals intended to venerate the ancestors (Fowler, 2006; Davison, 1985).

Pottery is also employed in the creation of musical instruments as found among the Kagoro, Attakar and Morwa peoples of the Jema'a Federation in Southern Kaduna State (Ames and Gourlay, 1978). The authors write that these special musical instruments known as *kimkim*, are "plosive aerophones" which are played during marriage ceremonies. The *kimkim* is also performed to address the wrongs of society by ridiculing the perpetrators through the use of satirical verses.

Speight and Toku (1999) point out that even though pottery is the vocation of women in most African societies, a minority group of men sometimes also produce a special type of pottery such as ritual drums, pipes as well as bellow tips for smelting purposes. The authors add that in some societies, when men are engaged in pottery making, women were prohibited from coming near them at certain stages of the production process.

5. Finding and Discussion

The history of pottery production in the Sirigu culture could not be traced concretely. The consensus is that the craft has been practiced since time immemorial, by the forebears of the current inhabitants of the community. Pottery, referred to locally as *yag-basa*, is largely practiced during the dry season after the harvest, the respondents explained. Small quantities are however produced during the rainy season, if the need arises.

Generally, pottery production in the Sirigu society is a female dominated activity. The researcher has however observed a handful of men producing figurines, miniature architectural objects, smoking pipes, and decorative plates for economic purposes. The above observations correspond with Chanda (2008) and Speight and Toku's (1999) findings concerning the involvement of men in pottery production in other African communities. The current study has not uncovered any prohibition that particularly favoured any of the

sexes in the production of pottery in the Sirigu community. The basic precondition for engaging in pottery production therefore is interest and expertise.

The female potters questioned explained that the pottery making know-how was imparted to them during their adolescent ages. The respondents named their Mothers, Elder sisters, Mother-in laws, and Grand Mothers as the ones who imparted the knowledge to them. The learning processes, according to the potters progressed from very rudimentary stages such as clay extraction, drying, pounding and sieving, to more complex and intricate processes such as mixing of clay, forming, pre-firing ornamentation, firing and post-firing ornamentation techniques.

Specialization, the researcher noticed, was very limited. Most of the respondents could produce all the essential pots found in the community.

5.1. Pottery Typology

The researcher identified seven main categories of pottery wares in the Sirigu community. Generally, all the pottery products were ornamented in varied degrees. Below are the main categories of pottery products found in Sirigu:

5.2. Culinary Pots

Zeero Dukor and Saa Dukor

These pots have been identified as the two main pottery wares used in cooking daily meals. *Zeero dukor* is employed in the preparation of vegetable soups and sauces whiles *saa dukor* is used to cook *tuo zafi*, a thick millet porridge normally eaten with vegetable soup or sauce (see Figure .1). A variety of the *zeero dukor* is also sometimes used in preparing herbal medicines for treating many ailments in the community.



Figure 1: *Zeero Dukor* (left), *Saa Dukor* (right)

Uwa

This pottery type comes in various sizes. It has several bored holes on the main body of the pots. The study shows that it is used for smoking all types of meat and fish (Figure .2).



Figure 2: *Uwa*

Mala and masala

The *masala* and *mala* are basically designed for baking. *Masala* is a bowl with two handles whiles the *mala* has a honey-comb appearance (see Figure .3). They are largely used in baking millet cakes.



Figure 3: *Masala* (left), *Mala* (right)

Katariga

This is a set of two pottery wares, comprising a base pot and a bowl. The bowl comes with tiny holes bored at its base and superimposed on the base pot. These sets of pots are used for steaming all types of meat and fish (Figure .4).

Sere

This bowl measures about 91.44 centimetres in diameter and reaches a height of about 45.72 centimetres. It is usually used in preparing shea butter (Figure .5). It also possesses other utilitarian functions such as storing water.

Figure 4: *Katariga*Figure 5: *Sere**Da-ane*

This is a v-shaped pottery ware of about 60.96 centimetres in height, and spans about 121.92 centimetres in diameter. It is used for fermenting millet for the preparation of *pito* beer. It also serves as a vessel for freshly prepared *pito* beer (Figure .6).

Figure 6: *Da-ana*5.3. *Serving and Eating**Lasuliga and Lapea*

The two main pottery varieties used for serving food are *lasuliga* and *lapea*. *Lasuliga* is used for serving vegetable soup and sauce while *lapea* is the main pottery bowl used for serving *tuo zafi*, a thick millet preparation normally eaten with vegetable sauce or soup (refer to figure .7).

Figure 7: *Lasuliga* (bottom), *Lapea* (top)5.4. *Water and Beverage**Yore*

Generally, these very large pots measuring about 45.72 centimetres in diameter and towering about 60.96 centimetres or more, are referred to as *yore*. The researcher identified two main varieties of *yore* pottery types (See Figure .8). The first variety is a pear-shaped pot with two handles affixed to the opposite sides, which comes with a lid. The second variety is round-shaped, and is sold with or without lids. While the first variety is mainly used for storing drinking water, the second variety may be used for fetching as well as storing water.



Figure 8: Yore (pear-shaped (left), (round (right)

Yogila

This pottery variety is quite smaller than the *yore* types. It is used in fetching and storing water for drinking, especially on the field. They are made without lids.



Figure 9: Yogila.

Figure 10: Dua nobila

Dua nobila

This is a rotund-shaped pot with two or more vertical-shaped spouts affixed to the top. They are used for serving water and *pito* beer (see figure .10).

Bugutar

This is also a rotund-shaped pottery piece with two slanted spouts positioned on its topmost part. The two spouts are linked with clay slab to form a handle. It is used mostly as a mobile water container on the field. Some also use it as *pito* beer container.

5.5. Storage

Peligo, lamolga, and kalenga

This is a three-set or four-set storage pottery used by most women. The *kalenga* is a sizeable pot about 30.48 centimetres in diameter and about 45.72 centimetres in height. This forms the base pot, on which are superimposed the *lamolga* and the *peligo*. This is used in storing millet, beans or groundnut.

The *lamolga* in some cases consist of two, instead of one pot making it a four-set piece. The *lamolga*, which is a bowl, is used in storing dry meat, fish, millet or any other food stuff. Ritually, it is also used as a container for burying the placenta of newly born babies.

The *Peligo* is a round-shaped pot with a lid. The lid is affixed to the main pot with fibre ropes. The respondents explain that it is used in storing cooking ingredients such as salt, pepper, and other seasonings. It may be used for storing other precious materials such as money and jewellery. One respondent explains that witches are known to hide their witchcraft powers inside the *peligo*. The fibre ropes are intentionally woven in a manner that makes it difficult to access the contents of the pots in a hurry (See Figure .11).



Figure 11: 4-set storage pottery

Figure 12: cracked and old pots used as storage vessels

Dukor vuliga

This is a small pot with a lid. It is used for storing shea butter, an essential cooking item and skin moisturizer. It is about 16 centimetres in diameter and 18 centimetres in height.

Old and Cracked Pots as Storage Vessels

The study reveals that generally, cracked and old pottery wares (see figure .12) are used for storing grains such as millet, beans, and groundnuts. These are usually stored at the corner of homesteads, and sealed with cow dung to protect them against insects and rodents.

5.6. Funeral and Ritual

Bagadokor

This is a round pot with a lid, and studded with clay spikes. The respondents explain that it is used for the containment of spiritually energized herbs and other ingredients used for healing various ailments and protection against evil forces. The *bagadokor* is also employed in rituals intended to venerate ancestral spirits (Figure .13).

Figure 13: *Bagadokor*Figure 14: *Norsere**Lamolga*

Lamolga is used in burying the placenta of newly born babies. Some of the interviewees explained that the placenta is placed in the pot and buried vertically on a rubbish dump. They further add that this is done secretly, to prevent people with evil intentions from knowing the burial spot. They further add that if the pot is buried upside down, the woman who yields the placenta would become barren (Figure .11).

Old Cooking Pots as Ritual Objects

Old cooking pots, especially *zeero dukor* and *saa dukor* (see figure .1), may be used ritually to bury aborted or miscarried fetuses. It is believed that this ritual enables the deceased beings to properly incarnate and run the full course of their lives, just as the old cooking pots in which they are interred.

During the funeral rites of women, the above-mentioned cooking pots belonging to the deceased woman are ritually broken. Two contradictory explanations were offered for the ritual. Whiles some of the respondents believe the ritual symbolically separates the deceased from the living, others hold the view that by breaking the pot the deceased woman would be able to use the pots in the spirit world to cook.

5.7. Livestock Care

Norsere

This is a round pot with about four or more holes, measuring about 10 centimetres in diameter, bored on the body of the pot. It is used as a watering trough for chickens and guinea fowls (Figure .14).

6. Miscellaneous Pottery

The researcher has also discovered that other pottery products such as figurative smoking pipes (*tadokor*), human and animal figurines and miniature architectural objects are produced in the Sirigu community, mainly by men. Apart from the pipes, which are used by some men and women alike to smoke tobacco, the figurines and the miniature architectural objects are mainly created for the tourist market.

7. Discussion

It is quite obvious that pots in the Sirigu society are designed and produced as solution to problems that the women, and for that matter, the community encounters. The creation of pottery products helps the head woman to accomplish her mandatory obligation of nutritionally sustaining the family. The pottery helps the Sirigu woman to fetch and store water, herbs, cooking ingredients and other personal belongings. Pottery wares are also copiously employed in cooking and serving foods and beverages within the community.

Apart from its domestic applications, pottery is also employed in other spheres of the Sirigu community. Philosophically, the conception of children and their ultimate birth into the Sirigu society is metaphorically compared to the potting process itself. It is therefore not surprising that still-born and miscarried fetuses are buried in well-used cooking pots, which are believed to have fully

passed through the complete potting processes and have been put into use. It is believed that if the child reincarnates, he or she would be expected to traverse the full length of life, just as the pot in which he or she had been buried.

As stated earlier, the placenta of newly born babies are placed in a special pottery bowl called *lamolga* and buried on rubbish dumps. The respondents explained that the ritual is a very important spiritual exercise that helps the woman who yields the placenta to conceive again and give birth to other children in the future. The interviewees intimated that the *lamolga* bowl could be exhumed and re-buried upside down in a special ritual by an enemy to prevent the woman who yielded the placenta from further births. The above revelation clearly underpins the cosmological beliefs of the people of Sirigu. The assertion that pottery is believed to play a crucial role in fertility rites in this society can therefore not be said to be farfetched.

Cooking pots are also broken on the death of a woman to symbolize her alienation from the society and to make it possible for her to use the pot in the spirit world for cooking. This again echoes the community's belief in life after death.

Pots also play very important roles in traditional medicine. Special herbal preparations are cooked in pots for the treatment of a plethora of diseases in the society. The use of traditional pots is believed to please benevolent spirits, who in turn imbue the herbal materials with healing properties for the treatment of diseases. Spiritually energized materials may also be kept in pots for the protection and bestowment of good health and prosperity of an individual, a family or a clan, as typified in the use of the *bagadokor* medicine pots (See Figure .13).

The usage of Sirigu pottery in the preparation of medicine and public religious rites again makes it not only a domestic art form, but a public one as well. The study shows that the *Tendaana* or earth priest and other traditional healers use a lot of pottery wares in rituals for the protection of the entire society against disease, bad luck, famine, and against black magic. The traditional healer uses pots in preparing varied herbal decoctions for the treatment of many sicknesses in the society. The pottery could therefore be seen as being in the service of the entire society.

The pottery is also sold for money or commuted for goods such as dry fish and salt in Sirigu. This practice has been detected by Aronson (1991) in many other pottery producing communities in Africa. Sirigu pottery therefore also plays a very important role in the indigenous economy.

As has also been detected among the Gurensi by Smith (1989), broken pieces of pots are also used in the construction of shrines in the Sirigu community. The potshards are incorporated mostly on the upper parts of shrines to contain sacrifices and offerings made to ancestors and other protective spirits. This acts as a conduit between spirit beings and members of a family, clan or the entire Sirigu community. This practice can therefore be said to instill spiritual harmony between those living in the spirit world and those physically present on earth.

The pots also aid in communicating indigenous cultural practices and values of the people of Sirigu to the younger generations through their constant use in funerals, religious rites, and in the domestic arena.

8. Constraints

The respondents revealed that pottery production in Sirigu is very fast declining because of the dictates of globalization. The researcher has observed that pottery wares were being replaced with metal, plastic and fiberglass containers in most homes. The proliferation of these foreign products imposes a devastating impact on the pottery industry, the local tourism industry as well as the socio-cultural systems of the society. However, one cannot also overlook the fact that the plastic, metal and fiberglass wares are more durable than the indigenous pottery.

The introduction of formal education has to some extent also worked against the sustenance of the pottery industry within the community. Most people from Sirigu who had received formal education turn to cherish imported customs and traditions, to the detriment of the indigenous ones. To such people, anything that has to do with the indigenous culture is considered archaic and primitive, the Potters lamented.

It is very important to also state that the massive migration of the female-youth to Accra and Kumasi as porters (*kayaye*), may be partly responsible for the decline in pottery production in the Sirigu community. This is because they do not stay long in the Sirigu community to enable them, acquire the needed pottery skills.

Indeed, many of the potters interviewed by the researcher are aged artisans. It can therefore be surmised that unless something is done quite quickly to revitalize the industry, this unique pottery tradition could be lost.

9. Conclusion

Findings of the study show that pottery production in Sirigu is mostly a female vocation. The research further shows that pottery usage in the community is not only limited to the domestic setting, where they are employed in the storage of water, cooking materials as well as the preparation and serving of food and beverages. But they are also used in many socio-cultural rituals and ceremonies that reflect the cosmological beliefs of the people of the society. It has also been discovered by the researcher that pottery production in the Sirigu community is dwindling due to the preference for metal, plastic and fiberglass vessels by most households in the community. The disinterest in the pottery industry by the youth has also been noted as one of the militating factors working against the Sirigu pottery industry.

10. Recommendations

Attempts must be made, however small, to reinvigorate interest in pottery production in the community. This could be done through annual competitions and educating the youth on the importance of the pottery art form during home-coming festivals.

A community museum must be built to showcase the Pottery wares and other cultural and historical items from Sirigu. This would help the community to organize itself better to receive tourists. The museum would not only influence the resurgence of cultural expressions such as dances and oral traditions, but also form the foundation for a process of social cohesion, encouraging local inhabitants to voluntarily deposit family and clan objects for preservation and income generation. Ceramic arts must be incorporated into the curriculum of Senior High Schools in and around Sirigu to whip-up interest in the art form. This would encourage the youth to get involved in the pottery industry and thereby keep it alive.

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